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Ice Hockey in Canada

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Ice Hockey in Canada



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The first game of ice hockey was played in Canada shortly before the turn of the century. Since that historic game, the popularity of the sport has grown steadily. Today, more than 260,000 Canadians play hockey in organized leagues, where adults and children as young as six years of age find skilled coaching and well-matched competition.

The game is played by two teams wearing skates. The players move a cylindrical piece of hard rubber (*puck*), about one inch thick and three inches in diameter, along the surface of an ice-covered playing arena (*rink*) by means of a bladed stick.

Description

The object of the game is to score goals by driving or shooting the puck with the hockey-stick into the opposing team's goal area, which is defended by a *goaltender*. If the puck is not stopped by the goaltender, one goal is counted for the attacking team. The team generally consists of from 15 to 20 players, six of whom may be on the ice at any time as the *playing* team. The members of the playing team alternate throughout the game, though the goaltender usually plays the entire game without substitution. The game, which is one hour in length, is divided into three playing periods of 20 minutes, with intervening rest-periods.

Besides providing many Canadians with recreation and exercise, hockey is Canada's most popular spectator sport. Thousands of people attend games every week in cities and towns, and millions regularly watch professional hockey on television.

Professional leagues

The foremost professional hockey association is the National Hockey League, which, despite its name, is international in scope. At present there are 17 teams in the NHL, three in Canada and 14 in the United States. The Canadian teams are the *Montreal Canadiens*, the *Toronto Maple Leafs* and the *Vancouver Canucks*. The U.S. teams are the *Boston Bruins*, the *New York Rangers*, the *New York Islanders*, the *Chicago Black Hawks*, the *Detroit Red Wings*, the *Los Angeles Kings*, the *Philadelphia Flyers*, the *Pittsburgh Penguins*, the *St Louis Blues*, the *Minnesota North Stars*, the *Buffalo Sabres*, the *Washington Capitals*, the *Atlanta Flames* and the *Colorado Rockies*.

National Hockey League teams play an 80-game schedule that lasts from early October to early April and culminates in an eight-team play-off. The symbol of professional hockey supremacy is the Stanley Cup, donated in 1893 by Lord Stanley of Preston during his term as Governor General of Canada.

A second major professional hockey league – the World Hockey Association – was formed in 1971. Eleven teams took part in the 80-game schedule for the season. Today the WHA comprises the following teams: Canada – Quebec City *Nordiques*, Winnipeg *Jets* and Edmonton *Oilers*; United States – New England *Whalers* (Hartford, Connecticut), Indianapolis *Racers*, Birmingham *Bulls* and Cincinnati *Stingers*.

The WHA trophy, the Avco Cup, was won by the Winnipeg *Jets* in the 1977-1978 season.

Professional hockey is also played in three other North American leagues – the American Hockey League, the Western Hockey League and the Central Professional Hockey League. Canada has only one team in these leagues – the Halifax *Voyagers* of the American Hockey League. With few exceptions, however, professional hockey players are Canadian-born. Canadians generally take an immense interest in the fortunes of all professional teams, no matter where “home ice” may be.

Amateur leagues

Canada’s top amateur trophy, the Allan Cup, was first awarded in 1908. Each spring Canada’s various senior leagues declare winners and those from each province compete in the national senior finals for this coveted trophy. Though played in smaller arenas than the Montreal Forum or

Toronto’s Maple Leaf Gardens, the Allan Cup finals often set attendance marks of nearly 50,000 for the entire playoff series.

Equal in prestige to the Allan Cup is the Memorial Cup, which is awarded to the best Canadian junior hockey team. This trophy was donated in 1919 as a memorial to the many Canadian hockey players who had served in the First World War. Memorial Cup competition is for junior teams with players 19 and 20 years of age, a group that includes practically all the professional “stars of tomorrow”. The national playoffs attract large numbers of spectators, the record being a total of over 100,000 for a seven-game series.

The Canadian Amateur Hockey Association, which stimulates interest and encourages ability in hockey throughout Canada, does not provide for national competition below the junior level. CAHA branches stage provincial championships for *juveniles* (16 and 17), *midgets* (14 and 15), and *bantams* (12 and 13). Intermediate divisions for adults, and junior classes below Memorial Cup calibre, have their own championships.

One reason for an upsurge of interest in hockey is the annual “Minor-Hockey Week in Canada”, held under the auspices of the CAHA and its branches. National publicity, thousands of community “minor-hockey nights”, and the support of

public figures, including the Prime Minister, have contributed to the success of this national institution.

Hockey Canada

As a result of the report in 1969 of the Task Force on Sport for Canadians, an organization called Hockey Canada was established. On its board of directors are representatives of all hockey interests in Canada, including the National Hockey League, the World Hockey Association, the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association and the Canadian Intercollegiate Athletic Union. In addition, it has representatives of the Federal Government and of the public at large.

Hockey Canada has assumed responsibility for Canada's participation in international hockey. In addition, it offers scholarships to outstanding young players who wish to continue their education, and conducts research into coaching methods.

International competition

Hockey has made great strides internationally since the first recognized world hockey competition took place at Antwerp in connection with the 1920 Winter Olympic Games. The Canadian Amateur Hockey Association has each year (with one or two notable exceptions, such as the Winter Olympics in Moscow in 1957, at which Canada was not represented)

provided the Canadian representative. Club teams (as distinct from national "all-star" teams) have won 19 world championships and six Olympic hockey titles. In addition, since 1945 Canada has sent many amateur teams on exhibition tours through such countries as Japan, Sweden, Finland, Norway, the U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, and East and West Germany.

In the last few years, the calibre of hockey in other countries has improved so much that Canada now feels justified in moving into the all-star classification, rather than sending a strengthened club team into world competition. The experiment with a *national* team started with the Ninth Winter Olympic Games at Innsbruck in 1964, at which Canada was represented by a group of young Canadians, mostly university students, between the ages of 19 and 27. The improvement in European teams was dramatically shown by a three-way tie for second place among Canada, Czechoslovakia and Sweden. When the goal averages were calculated, Canada, for the first time in history, failed to win an Olympic hockey medal.

In 1970, Canada withdrew from international competition on the ground that it was not allowed to send its best (i.e., professional) players. As a result of negotiations with the International Ice Hockey Federation, which led to the playing of the

Canada Cup tournament in 1976, Canada announced its intention of returning to international hockey under conditions that would allow professional players to take part, not only in Team Canada, but in the teams of all other nations that had players in the North American professional leagues. Team Canada 77, composed of players selected from NHL and WHA teams that had been eliminated from playoff competition*, travelled to Vienna to take part in the World Hockey Championships in April of 1977. After an absence of seven years, Canada had formally returned to international competition.

Team Canada 1972 and 1974

Years of negotiation between hockey officials of the Soviet Union and Canada culminated in September 1972 in an agreement that a series of eight games would be played between Canadian professionals from the National Hockey League and the amateur world champions from the U.S.S.R. The Canadians, who were ill-prepared for the first half of the series, lost the first game in Montreal, won the second in Toronto, tied the third in Winnipeg and lost the fourth in Vancouver.

Accompanied by nearly 3,000 devoted fans, Team Canada went on to defeat the Soviet team in Moscow,

thereby regaining some of the prestige lost during the Canadian half of the series.

In 1974, the newly-formed World Hockey Association, with a group of players far better prepared physically and psychologically than the 1972 Team Canada, took up the challenge of the Soviet Union to play a second series of eight games. This time the Soviet team defeated the Canadian "selects" fairly easily.

Canada Cup — the best against the best

In September 1976, for the first time, Canada selected a national team from its best available players to compete against the U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Finland and the United States. Hockey fans everywhere will long remember the excellent play and spirited competition of the Canada Cup, and Canadians look forward to a regular renewal of the series among the world's greatest national teams to take place alongside the yearly World Hockey Championships.

World Hockey Championships 1977-78

In April 1977, Canada returned to the annual World Hockey Championships. The Canadian team was made up of players chosen from teams eliminated from further Stanley Cup and Avco Cup play. Team Canada 77 finished in fourth place in this eight-

*The NHL and WHA championships were being held at approximately the same time.

team tournament. Canada, again using a similar selection system, won the bronze medal at the 1978 World Championship in Prague.

International rules and style of play

International hockey, under the rules of the International Ice Hockey Federation, is largely the same game as Canadian hockey; indeed, the IIHF rules were originally adopted, with a few exceptions, from the Canadian game. One of the more noticeable exceptions is the prohibition of the aggressive style of body contact allowed in the Canadian game.

There is also a difference between the size of the ice surface used in international competition and that used in Canadian hockey. Though rink surfaces are generally about the same length (60 metres), the Canadian surfaces are only about 26 metres wide, compared to 30 metres for international rinks. This wider ice-surface tends to "open up" the international game, placing more emphasis on speed and less on "body-checking" and individual puck-control. Both the 1972 and 1974 Canada-U.S.S.R. series were played according to international rules.



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